



Side SAPI plate saves life

Submitted by: 1st Marine Division

Story Identification #: 200651755243

Story by Cpl. Graham Paulsgrove

GHARMAH, Iraq (May 14, 2006) -- When an optional piece of gear became mandatory, complaints were lodged, but when the gear did its job - saving a Marine's life - a few opinions were changed.

Lance Cpl. Robert F. Dean, a light armored vehicle crewman with D Company, 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, owes his life to the small arms protective insert he had strapped to the side of his body armor when he was shot by an insurgent sniper May 14 near the city of Gharmah.

"I thought someone had thrown a rock at me," said Dean, from Spring, Texas.

Dean soon realized it was not a rock, but a bullet fired by an insurgent from roughly 500 meters away.

"We had an area cordoned off and the scouts were out searching the area," recalled Cpl. Dustin R. Nelson, Dean's vehicle commander. "I reached down to give him some water. As he popped out of his hatch to take it from me, I heard a crack."

The Marines immediately responded to the insurgent attack.

"The bullet would have hit his femoral bone, and possibly gone through and hit his femoral artery," said HN Chad T. Kenyon, 20, the corpsmen who treated Dean after the incident. "If that happened, he could have bled to death within a few minutes. It would have been a sticky situation, but the plates did their job and stopped the bullet."

"The round hit the very bottom of the plate, shattering some of the ceramic, but the fiber paper [backing the plate] caught the round like a baseball mitt," added Nelson, from Grand Junction, Colo.

Marines here are equipped with the interceptor body armor system, which consists of an outer tactical vest made of Kevlar and the small arms protective insert plates. The OTV and associated neck, throat and groin protectors are designed to offer protection from fragmentation weapons.



The ceramic SAPI plates are designed to defeat multiple hits from assault rifles common on the current battlefield. Recently, the side SAPI plates have been added to the armor system.

When the side SAPI plates were originally issued to the company, Marines with jobs that kept them inside their eight-wheeled vehicles- the drivers, gunners and vehicle commanders - could choose whether or not to wear the plates. Once the unit started operating around Fallujah under Regiment Combat Team 5, wearing the side plates was no longer a choice, it was a requirement.

"They make it harder to get in and out of the vehicle, but without them, I would probably be in bad shape," said Dean, 20, about his side SAPI plates. "It was a good thing that they made all of us wear them."

When the gear became mandatory for the Marines, some complained, but have since rescinded their objections after seeing the plates in action.

Thanks to the side SAPI plates, a life was perhaps saved and serious injury was definitely prevented.

"Now, our interpreter wants side SAPI's, before he was complaining that his flak was too heavy," Nelson said.

The Marine Corps has made several advancements in providing enhanced personal body armor for Marines and sailors deployed to Iraq. The level of protection of individual body armor has increased as advancements in the armor technology has improved and in response to the threats in the area.

Advancements include enhanced SAPI plates, which offer greater protection against small caliber weapons, the side SAPI plates, which increase protection on the flanks of the torso, and a new lightweight Kevlar **helmet**, which offers the same ballistic protection as the previous version but is easier to wear for long periods of time.